A 7,000-Foot Drop Down a Slide in a Boat

Shooting-the-Chutes for Fifty-two Miles From Snow-Capped Mountains Down to Green Valley Is Filled With Thrills

AH! WHAT would eastern people, who delight in coasting hills a quarter or even a half-mile long in wintry days, or who go into ecstacy at shooting down a toboggan slide, say to a ride, à la toboggan, down a slide for 50 miles? There are several places in California where such an experience may be had. The ride is not only an uninterrupted constant slide for 40 or 50 miles from start to finish, but it is as thrilling, risky and rapid as anyone might wish.

Think of riding in small craft in a great trough, projecting in the air 50 or even 75 feet above the earth, from a lofty mountain crest down through forests, across canyons, shooting around precipices and crags, flying over cattle ranches, orchards and vineyards, and darting, in this crude craft, over people's gardens and homes, amid very picturesque scenery.

Flumes by which cut lumber or logs may be floated down from the forests primeval, and the sawmills on the spurs of the Sierra Nevada range down to the valleys below, are common on the Pacific Coast from San Diego to Vancouver. They are built upon huge trestles and vary in height from 10 to 100 feet, depending upon the level of the country traversed. All the flumes are V-shaped, and the water flowing through is a yard deep at the deepest part. When in operation the flume is gorged for a week.

The longest flume is in northern California. It is 64 miles long and cost $430,000 when lumber was cheap. A new lumber flume was recently rebuilt in Fresno County. It is with this flume that this story deals. It leads from the immense pine forests on the mountains, 7,000 feet above sea level, down into the San Joaquin Valley, at the little town of Collis, near the raisin-making center, Fresno. In other words, the flume starts amid the perpetual snows and ice of the Sierras and terminates amid raisin vineyards and peach orchards of the semi-tropic San Joaquin. Stephenson Creek, in the mountains, supplies the water.

The boats in which the rapid journeys are made down the flumes are simple. They are made the shape of the V-boxes of the flumes. One end of the boat is closed by a board nailed across, but the other end is left open to let out the water which splashes over the sides of the boat from time to time. Short boards are laid across for seats, depending upon how many persons are to make the journey.

A carpenter can make one of these boats in half an hour. The boat is meant for only one journey, for none is ever hauled back for another voyage. Only a little preparation is necessary for a trip of this kind, and half a dollar will buy enough lumber for a boat, and a man is a poor carpenter, indeed, who cannot make his own vessel. The trip is made with little danger—at least in this Fresno County flume. The principal trouble is that when once started there are few places where one can stop. The current is generally so rapid that it makes landing impossible, and the voyager can only sit still and let the boat run.

The boat for the trip described in this article was made the evening before at the reservoir on Stephenson Creek, the eastern terminus of the flume, and everything was prepared for an early start and ample provision was made for all emergencies, even to taking along a shotgun and rifle for killing game that might be seen, for the flume, during more than 30 miles of its course, passes through a wild region of mountains, hills and forests, abounding in game. In a second or so after the passengers climbed in, the boat was sweeping down the trough of water, and trees were spinning past so rapidly that they seemed almost like the spokes of a swift wheel.

The passenger has an ungovernable desire to clutch at things, but before he can do so he is gone, and the speed makes him catch his breath, and that is all he can do. If one should attempt to stop when the speed is so great it would result in something serious. Even if he should see a broken place ahead of him, where the flume has gone over a precipice, he would not stop, but must run into it and take the consequences. Such a mishap is not likely, but it is possible. There are places, here and there where the flume passes over, more nearly level and the current is correspondingly slow. Here a person can spring out and let the boat go; or he might, when safely out, run along the foot plank, and, by holding the boat, bring that to a stop also. But in the steepest places a man could not run fast enough to keep up with the boat.

Before the passenger has time to look back or forward or to ask any questions he has run the first half mile and is sweeping around a curve which opens to his sight a vision not pleasant to contemplate. The flume passes between two walls of rock and then out along the face of a solid rock, forming the side of Stephenson Mountain.

If one can look down while speeding across this giddy height he will see beneath him the canyon of the creek, deep down in the shadows of morning, almost dark with the depths. The boat seems to be flying through space. It is only a moment till the giddy place is passed and the boat darts into a mass of gloomy pines growing against the side of the mountain.

The place just behind was one of the most perilous in the flume. In building the structure the workmen could not find footing, and were let down by ropes from the brink of the cliff above, and thus they hung while with hammer and drill they cut holes in the solid rock, and made anchorages in which to hang the flume. Now it rests there perhaps solid enough and probably safe enough, but one has strange feelings as he sits there in a narrow boat and makes the voyage in mid-air like a bird, not knowing when one of the cleats will snap and let the whole structure plunge into the depths beneath.

On that morning there were many and large icicles hanging under the flume. They could be seen while the boat passed around curves, thus bringing perhaps half a mile of the flume in view. For several days the weather had been cold, and as the flume leaks all along, large icicles are the result. Some of them weighed not less than one hundred pounds each, and they covered all the timbers beneath the box, often giving the structure a fantastic appearance. Sometimes the ice was piled up from the ground to the flume, 20 or 30 feet, in columns and arches, having the appearance of marble of intense whiteness. If the water were permitted to flow all winter in the flume, there might be danger of the ice accumulating until the weight on some of the high trestles would be sufficient to drag the entire structure down.

After a four-mile run the boat suddenly emerges from a forest of pines and fir, and the passengers in the boat experience the feeling of a person in a balloon, when the world seems to drop away from under him. The flume runs out over a high trestle, and at first glance nothing is visible underneath. There seems to be nothing but unfathomable space. This is near the turn around the point of Stephenson Mountain, and the vast abyss beneath, which seemed bottomless, is the canyon of the San Joaquin River, down just how far beneath would be hard to guess. It looks not less than 3,000 feet; it may be less.

But by leaning over as the boat hurries by, one can catch a momentary view of the white form of the river of the canyon. Not a sound is heard. The plunging of the river over sunken rocks that fret its channel cannot send even a murmur up the summit of the cliff from which the passenger in the flume boat looks down as he hurries on. Nearly everywhere in sight the canyon is dark at that hour in the morning, but at two or three places the sunlight pours through gateways in the cliffs, and the beams fall on foaming floods, silent in the distance, and gild the blackness of the granite cliffs which hang like walls a thousand feet above the river. The passenger cannot look twice at the scene. The next minute he has passed again into the timber; then comes curve after curve around a rocky mountain, and after a little while the canyon, which had seemed so nearly bottomless, has been left behind. The first 12 miles of the journey bring the traveler to the western face of Pine Ridge, the last drift of snow disappears and the stately groves of sugar pine and arbor vitae begin to give place to tangled thickets of manzanita and chaparral, and the starved and stunted digger pines and gnarled jack oaks take the place of the tamaracks which grow about the reservoir at the starting place.

Passing around the mountain at the head of Dry Creek, the voyager sees Fresno city, 45 miles distant, with the morning sun kindling on the metal roofs and glancing from the dome of the court house, so far away that it seems only a speck of light.

Although the roughest parts of the mountains are left behind after the head of Dry Creek is reached, the flume has still some of its steepest grades below that point. The decline is not uniform, varying from a hardly perceptible grade to as much as one foot in height.

Within five or six miles farther the flume sweeps around the brink of a high, bold granite cliff, and two miles away and 2,000 feet below, the little village of Toll House bursts into view.

When the flume has passed Toll House it has entered the foothills, and the excitement is over. The way leads for 20 miles down a narrow valley, and the passengers in the boat have nothing to alarm them.

The speed grows less as the plains are approached. From the foot of the hills the distance to the terminus of the flume at Clovis is about 12 miles, and the speed lessens all the time.

It had occupied four hours, and the boat in that time had carried its passengers from a region of winter, with its ice and snow, into a country where grapes were on the vines.

A schooner driven ashore and all but pounded to pieces at Long Beach, N. Y., on the Atlantic Ocean.